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17th February 2021

Deputy Shortall,
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ Ref 5364/21 To ask the Minister for Health the number of lactation consultants in each CHO; the number of CHOs which plan to advertise posts for dedicated lactation consultants in the next three months; and if there are plans to remove any lactation consultants from CHOs in tabular form.

Dear Deputy Shortall,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the above Parliamentary Question, which you submitted to the Minister for Health for response. I have examined the matter and the following outlines the position.

Given the extraordinary circumstances of the Covid-19 global pandemic, there may be variations in some maternity support services in the community, as local service providers work to adhere to public health measures to minimise risks and ensure the safety of families and staff. We appreciate the patience shown by families as we work through these difficult months, providing high-quality maternity and infant care and keeping our patients and services safe from COVID-19.

We know breastfeeding support is most effective where it is face to face, scheduled and predictable and provided by trained health professionals and/or peer counsellors. Midwives and Public Health Nurses are trained and are skilled in supporting breastfeeding commencing in the antenatal period with the delivery of antenatal/breastfeeding education. Midwives support mothers to establish breastfeeding immediately after birth and help mothers learn the skill of breastfeeding in the immediate post natal period. Public Health Nurses, many of whom are Midwives and Paediatric Nurses are also trained and skilled in providing breastfeeding support throughout the post natal period. Every mother is visited by a Public Health Nurse within 72 hours of leaving hospital and home visits supporting breastfeeding mothers have continued throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

Integrating routine lactation consultant support improves the experience of care mothers receive and breastfeeding initiation and duration rates. Breastfeeding clinics and online breastfeeding support meetings are provided by the HSE and HSE funded voluntary breastfeeding organisations around the country. Facilitators of these groups have International Board Certified Lactation Consultant qualifications or are experienced trained peer counsellors. There are a number of Public Health Nurses

with International Board Certified Lactation Consultant qualifications working within Public Health Nursing teams throughout the country providing additional breastfeeding support within front line services.

There are 9.8 Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) staff working in dedicated Lactation Consultant roles within Public Health Nursing services. This represents an increase of 5.8 WTE's in the past 4 years within this service. In parallel to these resources, there are a further 20.59 Whole Time Equivalent Lactation Consultant posts within Maternity Hospitals and units to provide specialised care for mothers experiencing challenges with breastfeeding. They also support the development of skills and knowledge of other front line colleagues working within maternity services. This represents an increase of 7.17 Whole Time Equivalent Lactation Consultant posts in the maternity service in the last 4 years.

A further 6.5 additional Lactation Consultant posts for maternity services and a national lead to support implementation of National Standards for the Baby Friendly Initiative in hospitals have been funded through the National Maternity Strategy in 2020 and 2021 and these are expected to be in post in 2021.

Other supports have been developed during the pandemic, with a number of hospital antenatal breastfeeding classes and some breastfeeding groups run by the HSE and voluntary organisations moving online. Over 60 virtual breastfeeding support group meetings are held each month. Phone and virtual breastfeeding support is also being made available to replace face-to-face appointments, while face-to-face one-to-ones are being provided where needed. The HSE run a free online breastfeeding advice and information service staffed by experienced lactation consultants 7 days a week, there was a 38% increase in demand for the service in 2020 with almost 4,000 breastfeeding questions answered via live chat or e-mail.

The table below outlines the location of lactation consultants within Community Healthcare Organisation areas, whilst the 20.59 existing WTE and the additional 6.5 WTE lactation consultants coming on stream in 2021 based in maternity services are distributed throughout our 19 maternity services and units.

Health Service Area	WTE Feb 2021
CHO 1	
Cavan/Monaghan	1
CHO 3	
Clare	1
Limerick	1
North Tipperary	1
CHO4	
North Lee	1
West Cork	0.8
CHO 5	
South Tipperary	1
CHO6	
Wicklow South	0.5
Dublin South East	0.5
Dun Laoghaire	0.5
Wicklow North	0.5
CHO8	
Longford/Westmeath	1

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,



Mary-Jo Biggs, General Manager, National Women and Infants Health Programme